

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES REVIEW

Briefing Paper

February 17, 2004

The federal Department of Health and Human Services completed a review of Washington State's child welfare system in November 2003. The review points out areas of strength and areas needing improvement. The review establishes a baseline for future improvements.

Washington Child Welfare Background

- Washington has a good foundation to build on because of the state's progressive [*Kids Come First Action Agenda*](#), launched in 2000 by DSHS Secretary Dennis Braddock.
- New tools for assessing children's risk of harm, improved training for both social workers and foster parents, and reduced caseloads for social workers are improvements made through ***Kids Come First***.
- The Washington State Legislature funded new positions in the 2001-2003 biennium. Since that time, the total number of social workers statewide is increasing, from 928 positions in 2001 to 981 in November 2003, a six percent increase. While caseload sizes vary in offices throughout the state, the average caseload size has decreased by about one-third since 1995.
- Child Protective Services workers (providing investigative risk assessment and short term services) average 26 cases a month.
- Child Welfare workers (providing permanency planning and long term intensive case management services) average 22 cases a month.
- Forty four field offices across the state provide child protective and child welfare services. Some field offices are small and workers perform both the investigative risk assessment and long term intensive case management services. The statewide average number of cases (all case types) for all workers is 25 cases a month, the level at which we are legislatively funded.
- In 2003, we handled 94,800 new requests for services, 77,200 were allegations of child abuse and neglect. 7,100 children were placed in out-of-home care.
- The Children's Administration is in the process of accrediting the offices. Eight of the 44 child welfare field offices plus headquarters meet the highest standards in child welfare practice, earning accreditation status

from the international Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children.

Foster Families

- Washington has taken a very active role in recruiting foster parents, through the *Kids Come First Action Agenda*. There were 5,843 foster homes in 1999 and 6,284 in 2003, an eight percent increase. The administration is placing more emphasis on training and supporting foster parents to increase retention.
- Washington still has a need for Hispanic, African American and Native American foster families, as well as families who can take sibling groups, families who will take older children, and families who can help children who may have developmental or mental health issues.

Child and Family Services Review in Washington

- The Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) is a comprehensive assessment of child welfare services and examines the entire child welfare system in each state. The review also evaluates the court system, mental health system, substance abuse programs, and the array of services available to support the safety, permanence and well-being of children. The review examines child and family outcomes and the soundness of the infrastructure that supports child welfare services. The review helps states build a stronger foundation to provide consistently good services, which will result in improved outcomes for children and families.
- The goal of the Review is to help states improve their child welfare services and achieve the following outcomes for families and children who receive services:
 - **Safety**—First and foremost, children are protected from abuse and neglect. A child is safely maintained in their home whenever possible and appropriate.
 - **Permanency**—Children have permanency and stability in their living situations. Family relationships and connections are preserved for children.
 - **Family and Child Well-Being**—Families have enhanced capacity and support to provide for their children's needs. Children receive appropriate services to meet their physical, educational and mental health needs.

- This marks the first time the federal government has reviewed state child welfare programs using performance-based outcomes. The review process itself has changed since it began in 2000. The federal standards have raised the bar in child welfare practice across the country.
- 41 states have been reviewed since 2001, with reports issued. 32 states were reviewed in 2001 and 2002; nine in 2003, including Washington. **None of the 41 assessed states have met all** the federal standards.
- Only three of 44 local offices were included in Washington's on-site review. The CFSR team examined a total of 50 cases out of the approximately 25,000 cases receiving services each month across the state.
- Data for the review was gathered from October 2001 through September 2002. The case sample was pulled from cases open between October 2002 and May 2003. Some of these cases were closed early in 2003 and do not reflect current practice improvements.
- Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) cautions against using this data to judge the effectiveness of one state versus another. Comparisons among the states can be misleading because of variations in state laws, policies, definitions and data collection processes.
- Washington, like the other 41 states that completed the review, did not meet the federal standards in all areas examined by the reviewers.
- The reviewers identified many strengths in Washington, but found inconsistency in practice across the state. The reviewers also recognized that other systems (e.g., courts, mental health and substance abuse treatment) are factors in achieving permanency and well-being for children and families. We will be looking at these, and all the issues the reviewers identified, as we develop a program improvement plan.
- Washington was found to be in substantial conformity on four of the seven systemic factors. Washington met the federal standards for two of the six data indicators and was within five percent of meeting two others. Washington was not in substantial conformity on any of the seven child welfare outcomes—safety, permanency and well-being—assessed during the review.
- Many of the areas identified for improvement can be addressed through reprioritizing existing resources. Some new resources may be required to solve larger issues such as the accessibility and availability of mental health services, increasing court capacity and representation to help achieve more timely permanence for children. Additional resources may

also be required to increase visitation between parents and children and to increase the face-to-face time between social workers and children and families. It is important that we take the time necessary and ensure we get community involvement in assessing the resources we need.

- Financial penalties are a possibility for all states that do not implement a successful program improvement plan. Penalties are one percent of the federal funds for each of the 14 areas that are not in substantial conformity with federal requirements. Washington could be penalized \$1.5 million if we have not demonstrated significant improvement when the state is reassessed in two years.

Highlights from the Review Where Washington Meets National Standards

- We protect foster children, with low abuse rates of children in foster care that far exceed federal standard. This is the result of the state's effective system for screening prospective foster and adoptive parents. During the review, no children were found to be at imminent risk of harm
- We reunite 82 percent of foster children with their families within a year, well exceeding the federal standard.
- We successfully place more children than ever with relatives, preserving powerful family ties when children can't return home to their parents
- We found adoptive homes for more children in 2003 than at any time in our history.
- We successfully place children with their siblings and in close proximity to their parents.
- We coordinate and integrate services for children and families served by various agencies and are responsive to the needs of the community.
- We developed an excellent quality assurance system, with standards in place that ensure children in foster care are provided quality services that protect their safety and health.
- We developed a strong computer data system to track children, help us best use our resources and provide the technical support our program requires.
- We provide effective competency-based training to new social workers.

- We came within five percentage points of achieving the federal standards for timely adoptions and for placement stability.

Challenges from the Review to Improve Washington's Child Welfare System

- **Permanency and Stability for Foster Children:** We are very close to meeting the federal standard for placement stability. The federal standard is that 86.7 percent of children have two or fewer moves in 12 months. Washington's percentage is close at 83.7 percent. The assessment noted that we were not consistent in our efforts to prevent children from re-entering foster care and establishing permanency goals in a timely manner. Reviewers recognized that overburdened court dockets, continuances and insufficient representation for parents and the department are barriers to more timely permanency decisions.
- **Kinship Care and Continuity of Family Connections:** We increased the number of children placed with relatives to 32 percent last year and are diligent in placing children with their siblings and in close proximity to their parents. Challenges include the barriers to both licensed and non-licensed care provided by family and extended family members, engaging fathers, involving children and parents in case planning and ensuring frequent visitation between parents and children and between siblings.
- **Foster Parent Recruitment and Retention:** We have made some gains in recruiting new foster parents over the last few years, but more has to be done to recruit a diversity of homes to serve minority populations. Retaining foster homes continues to be a challenge. These issues will be tackled as we reevaluate the Foster Care Improvement Plan.
- **Child Safety:** We plan to examine a cluster of issues around child protection. Of most concern is the need to develop a higher level of consistency and quality in the areas of safety assessments and timely responses to reports of child abuse and neglect, including timely face-to-face interviews with alleged child victims.
- **Services for Children:** Another challenge is services and educational and vocational opportunities for adolescents in the foster care system. We need to assess the scope of our authority and the parameters of our involvement with children who have been referred to the department, who have educational needs, and are living in their own homes.
- **Children's Mental Health Services:** The existing mental health system is structured to provide short-term care that does not meet the long-term mental health needs of children in foster care. The DSHS Children's

Administration is working collaboratively with the DSHS Health and Rehabilitative Services and Juvenile Rehabilitation administrations to redesign the entire children's mental health delivery system.

- **Contact between Social Workers and Families:** Data and research shows clearly that more face to face contact with children and parents improves outcomes for children and families. Washington needs to improve the ability of workers to spend more time with the families and children they serve.